

THE BATTLE OF PRESTONPANS

fighting one another on the battlefields of Europe. When James VII lost the Battle of the Boyne some 50,000 Irish and Scots followed him into exile in France. James quickly realised that unless these communities were transformed into something worth keeping by foreign rulers, they would be asked to leave. But they had vowed to go home only when their king was restored. James' answer to the Irish/Scots exodus was to create regiments that would fight on behalf of other rulers, sometimes even against England. They were to be paid, housed, watered and fed, not as mercenaries, but as hired military help. This was nothing new. The Duke of Hesse, for example, hired his soldiers to the first three Hanoverian Georges and their pay was settled by the British Parliament. James' concept, of course, gave a ready made army to many rulers in Europe, not least France, Spain and the few sovereign Dukes of Italy. With a Stewart restoration, it was understood that the map of Europe would change very quickly, due to the sudden lack of the Stewart warfare machine. Today, scarcely one aristocratic French and Spanish family is not diluted with the blood of those exiled Jacobite fighters, both Irish and Scots.

7. Preparing for Battle with Cope

When Cope arrived with his troops in Stirling, most of his men were of foreign origin. They had fought battles in Europe and were therefore well hardened for a military campaign. Already, he had attempted to meet Charles' troops in battle, but two things had prevented this: firstly, General Lord George Murray knew the Highland area much better than Cope and secondly, most of the clans Cope thought he could count on simply turned their backs on him. In fact, once he had marched north of Perth, those Highlanders who had been forcibly enlisted simply went over to Charles' side. Fort Augustus proved the case against him, while Charles was marching happily onwards to Perth where he received a hero's welcome. Cope took ship for Dunbar where he arrived on September 15th, while the rest of his troops arrived two days later. On September 19th he left Dunbar for Edinburgh via Haddington. His problem was that the city of Edinburgh was already in Jacobite hands. However, he did not envisage that the Jacobite forces would be difficult to engage and destroy: his troops were rested and battle-ready. The Highlanders, the 'rabble of the north' as his officers referred to them, would be

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crushed and would probably run for their lives once they realised what they were up against.

On hearing that Cope had settled just a few miles from Edinburgh, Charles called his officers and advisers to attend a council of war. All were keen to meet Cope's army and send them packing over the border. George Murray, Charles' chief military officer, gave them his visualisation of how the clash would take place. Charles, of course, wanted to see the site beforehand and so they set off to scour the area and take a look at Cope's army. In the end, it was decided that the Jacobite army should pitch their tents slightly west of Tranent on the old post road. The army, then based at Duddington, marched by Musselburgh to the brow of Carberry Hill by Fa'side Castle through Tranent and lay all night on the high moorland to the east of the village. Cope had formed his army on the low ground between the sea and the high road, halfway between Prestonpans and Cockenzie, to the south of these villages. Charles retired for the night sleeping in the field, lying on the ground without any covering but his plaid. It was then that Robert Anderson of Whitburgh, a native of the area whose father had been active in Mar's army of 1715, decided to tell Hepburn of Keith that he had thought of a better way of fighting the Hanoverian forces. He and Hepburn decided to wake Lord George Murray to see if Anderson's plan could be put into action. Murray was so keen that he woke Charles in the middle of the night to tell him of this possible new plan of action.

Peter MacNeill, in his book, 'Prestonpans and Vicinity', has put it so well that I cannot but quote it:

“Anderson being a native of the district knew every inch of the ground. His scheme was to go round the south side of Tranent eastwards, over Tranent Muir northwards, and down by Riggonhead to Seton; then coming in by Meadowmill westwards, to take the Royal forces unawares from behind. And on the Saturday morning, 21st, about three o'clock, the movement was begun.”¹²

What began, of course, was the moving of some 2,400 Highlanders forming the Jacobite army. Macdonalds, Camerons, Stewarts of Appin, Drummonds, MacGregors, Athol men, Robertsons, MacLauchlans and many others including new recruits from Edinburgh, all came to teach the invaders a lesson. All this had to be done silently and without

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being seen by enemy. Anderson's involvement makes it clear that there were also Jacobite sympathisers in the area willing to help and fight.

It was just as well that Anderson came up with a new plan. Both Murray and Charles had felt that, although Cope had to be engaged, the Hanoverian general did have the better ground and the better chance of winning the battle. Cope was not a great general – far from it, but neither was he incompetent. Everything he did was by the book. Think of it: when he drew up his troops, he chose flat ground protected on three sides – by the sea, by park walls and by a few villages almost touching one another. Soft, boggy ground protected his south flank. At the time it was Cope who had the better deal, particularly for a combined action using his infantry and his cavalry, something that Charles' forces could not match. Jacobite reports of the site before the battle were of the opinion that it had been chosen with a great deal of skill. The more they examined it the more the Jacobites were convinced of the impossibility of attacking it. But in order to set the tone of this Jacobite enterprise this battle had to be won. Only then would the French send help, only if Prestonpans was favourable to Charles Edward would the other clans in the north rise to his call.

Nevertheless, the Jacobite troops were in high spirits, as conveyed in a popular ballad of the time by Adam Skirving, which was based on Charles' actual words to his troops:

“Cope sent a letter frae Dunbar:

Charlie meet me gin ye daur,
An' I'll learn you the art o' war,
If you'll meet wi' me in the morning

When Charles look'd the letter upon,
He drew his sword the scabbard from:
Come, follow me, my merry men,
And we'll meet Johnnie Cope i' the morning.”

Cope's address to his men before the battle showed contempt for the Highlanders and offered the opportunity for plunder once the battle was won:

“Gentlemen, you are about to fight with a parcel of rabble, a small number of Highlanders, a parcel of Brutes. You can expect no booty from such a poor, despicable pack. But I have authority to declare that you shall have eight full hours plunder and pillage of

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Edinburgh, Leith, and suburbs (the place which harboured and succoured them), at your discretion, with impunity.”¹³

Charles’ response was as follows:

“On being told of Cope’s words and of his reckoning that the day was his, Charles looked at his men and declaimed a prayer. No speech for Charlie, oh no, but a prayer that both defied Cope’s barbarism and reminded everyone of the just cause they were fighting for. ‘O Lord of Hosts who cans’t see through the thickest vail and disguise who vicisest the bottom of my heart and the deepest designs of my enemies who hast in thy hands as well as before thine eyes all the events which concern human life, if thou knowest that my victory will promote thy glory and the safty of thy people, if thou knowest that I have no other ambition in my soul but to advance the honour of thy holy name and the good of this state, favour O Great God the justice of my Arms and reduce all the Rebels to acknowledge him whom thy sacred decrees and the order of lawfull succession have made their soverigne. But if thy good Providence has ordered it otherwayes and thou seest that I should prove one of those Kings whom thou gavest in thine Anger, take from me O Mercifull God my life and my Crown, make me this day A Sacrifice to thy will. Let my death and the calamities of Brittain and let my blood be the last that is split in this quarrell.”¹⁴

A major problem that Charles encountered in his preparations was one of tradition. Who should form the right wing? To the Highland mind this was important. Bruce had given that prerogative to the MacDonalds and so Clan Colla (or MacColl) under the Duke of Perth was awarded the place of honour. The centre, under the command of Captain James Drummond, would be held by the Duke of Perth’s men and the MacGregors. The left wing, composed of the Camerons and Stewarts of Appin, was under the leadership of Lochiel and the command of Lord George Murray. Behind these stood Prince Charles and behind him a second line was formed with the Robertsons, McDonalds of Glencoe, MacLauchlans and the remainder of the Athol men, all under Lord Nairn.

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